

WORLD EXCLUSIVE!

I've got a road map for Avatar 2...

Empire sits down with James Cameron for his first post-*Avatar* interview

AND SO THE KING OF THE WORLD HAS ASCENDED to his throne yet again. Unless you've spent the past few months in a deep, dark hole searching for Unobtanium, you'll know that James Cameron's *Avatar* has exceeded all box-office expectations, shattering *Titanic*'s record global gross and amassing \$2.25 billion in its first two months of release. It's a result no-one, not even the most optimistic booster, foresaw as remotely possible.

As we went to print, *Avatar* had bulldozed its way to the front of the race for Best Picture at the Oscars, which made it a perfect time to sit down with Cameron to talk about the film's critical and commercial success, and the prospect of an *Avatar 2*. Which is exactly what we did...

WARNING: SPOILERS LURK WITHIN. DO NOT READ IF YOU'RE ONE OF THE 29 PEOPLE ON THE PLANET WHO HAVEN'T YET SEEN AVATAR.

If ever there was a time to say, "I told you so", is now that time?

[Laughs] I don't really think that way. I was telling everybody all the way along.

True. Even after Avatar Day, when there was a huge internet backlash, you remained very calm.

I welcomed it in a way. Let's get the controversy out of the way early on. If I hadn't been through the whole *Titanic* scenario, I might have felt a bit differently. I realised that there would be a whole lot of negativity right up until people actually got to see the movie. Then the movie gets judged on its merits, which is as it should be.

So you were calm. But did Fox panic?

I wouldn't say panic. They believed in the film. It might have influenced the marketing strategy somewhat. They took to heart some of the negativity on the blogosphere about the look of the characters. In Los Angeles, for example, in the entire domestic campaign they didn't do any outdoor advertising at all. Literally zero. Which was a little spooky. But they felt they didn't need it. They felt it was going to be a



BULLETIN JOEL EDGERTON BAGS LEAD IN *THE THING* REMAKE. SAM WORTHINGTON CAN'T BELIEVE IT...

> THE FIRST LOOK &
THE LAST WORD



BILL MURRAY WANTS TO BE A GHOST IN *GHOSTBUSTERS 3* > *BOURNE 4* TO BE A PREQUEL?

NEWSETC.

TV campaign and the cross-promotions would be sufficient, and they were right. The picture opened. But they were leery of seeing the faces of the characters because they had taken to heart the few negative comments. I kept telling them, "This is a vocal minority."

But *Avatar's* box-office performance has been truly phenomenal. Did you really expect it to do this well?

Look, we always set out to do something extraordinary, and when you do that, you create the possibility of an enormous upside. But you certainly haven't created a guarantee of it. If there's one thing I know about this business, I don't want to say that audiences are fickle, but our ability to interpret what audiences want at any given point in time is a flawed process. To have hit two bullseyes in a row is pretty cool – it's like winning the lottery twice in a row.

***Avatar's* now being touted as the frontrunner for the Oscars. Are you caught up in that?**

Having spent half a decade having worked on a system of self-worth that wasn't dependent on critics or voting, I'm very leery of reinvesting in that system. I always believe it's very unlikely that lightning will strike twice. I believe it's very unlikely that we will win because I made such a jackass of myself last time. Although there might be some curiosity about what I might do [laughs].

Do you have a line in mind should you win?

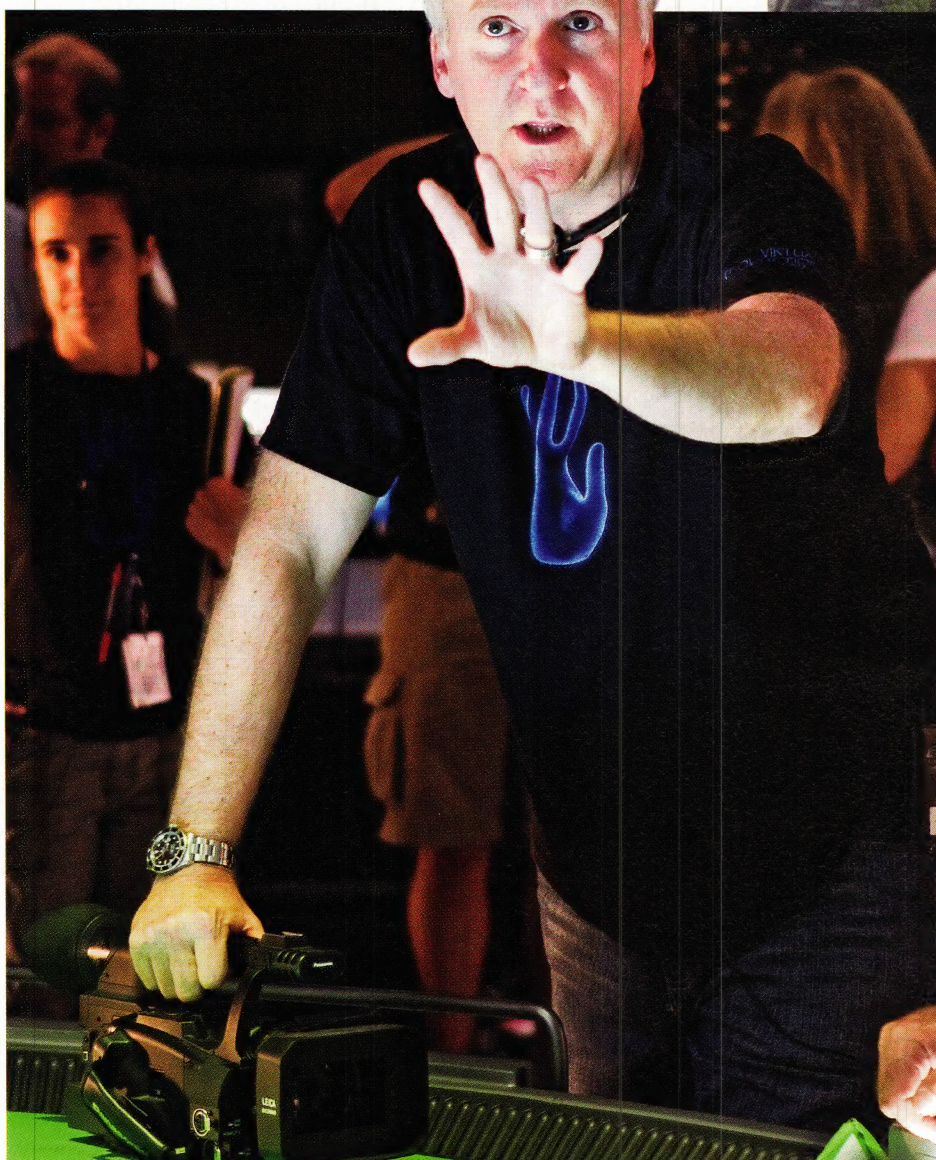
[Laughs] No. I'll cross that bridge when I come to it, just like last time.

You're competing with your ex-wife, Kathryn Bigelow...

Well, *Hurt Locker* is a very, very strong picture. Of the contenders that are being bandied about, it's definitely the strongest. Certainly it's Kathryn's moment. I would happily lose to her. I've already got one of those damn statues. I'd be pissed off if somebody else won, but I wouldn't mind if she won.

There's a big debate over whether Zoe Saldana should have been nominated...

Her performance is a world-class performance. There's a bit of a stigma about the idea of performance-capture. It's a question mark on the part of the acting community, a big part of the voting community



with regard to the Academy Awards. There was no interest from SAG in our cast, or at least it didn't reach the nomination threshold. We need to let the acting community understand fully what we did.

Rumour has it that you cut around 40 minutes or so from the film. What did you cut?

It started on Earth, which was about four minutes at the beginning of the film. We didn't have big fly-over shots like in *Blade Runner*. It was told from the standpoint of a guy in a wheelchair in this big crowded and unfriendly place. It just felt to me at a certain point that the movie started twice. I thought, Let's just

start once. But we even worked on the visual effects, which are mostly finished for Earth, so that'll be a little treat for the Blu-ray audience.

So no *Aliens*-style Extended cut?

I don't think so. If we tried to reconstitute the film to a longer version, it would be intercutting this template material, which might be strange.

It's not going to be another 12 years before we see you again, is it?

No guarantees. I was having a lot of fun and working very hard in the years between '98 and '05, when I started *Avatar*. I may well do the same thing again, although I'm not planning on any long hiatus.

Have you started to think about your next step as a director?

I have a number of projects, some that have never been made public. I'll be choosing from

"TO HAVE HIT TWO BULLSEYES IN A ROW IS PRETTY COOL – IT'S LIKE WINNING THE LOTTERY TWICE."

WATCHMEN 2 POSSIBLE. ENCHANTED 2 IS REAL ► WRITER SAYS SAW SERIES WILL STOP AT VII. PROMISE?



between them and trying to work out some sort of coherent strategy that thinks beyond the single film.

You've talked about an Avatar trilogy...

It wasn't really planned as a trilogy. I mapped out a second and a third story, but the second story is more in focus. The third story is fainter and if there were a fourth story, that would be fainter yet. But there's not really a trilogy. Which I think is a significant distinction – it's different from *The Lord Of The Rings* trilogy, which was actually a trilogy.

How distinct is Avatar 2?

I have a road map. I know where I'm going with it. The key to a sequel is to meet audience expectation and yet be surprising. That's an interesting equipoise, between those factors of expectation and surprise. But deals have to be made, things like that. It's not a

slamdunk that we're doing it. There was always this notion that it made sense from a business standpoint that if we invested all this money in the first film, that our margin would be less than it would be on the second film, where all the assets existed.

Will the sequel remain on Pandora?

I'm not going to discuss the sequel at all, right now. There'll be plenty of time to get a sense of that.

Shame that Quaritch isn't involved...

The thing about science-fiction movies, in general, is that you're never really dead. There are possibilities.

Thought you weren't going to discuss Avatar 2...

I'm not! [Laughs]

> **Avatar is out now.**

5 IDEAS FOR AVATAR 2

Avatar 2: Core Blimey

Producer Jon Landau has said, "We've explored the surface of Pandora. The interior remains to be seen." But what would the core contain? Huge quantities of Unobtainium? Ice-caverns? Tiny mole-men with helmets?

Avatar 2: Off-World

Pandora may not be the only exotic world RDA is exploiting. Could *Avatar 2* be set on a different planet altogether, as Jake and the Na'vi set out to shut down the interstellar imperialists for good?

Avatar 2: The Voyage Home

Then again, it may be Earth-bound, with our alien heroes taking the fight to humanity. And, no, we have no idea how the Na'vi would get there either. Or how they'd breathe.

Avatar 2: Colonel Clone

How could Quaritch come back? Well, what if the ultimate bad-ass was actually a clone, genetically designed by the military, and there's a whole squad of other Quaritches itching for revenge? We'd pay top dollar to watch multiple Stephen Langs munching on the scenery.

Avatar 2: Avatarder

Jake and Neytiri are snowed in at a Na'vi airport, when the place is attacked by terrorists, forcing Jake to dispatch them one by one. Features the memorable one-liner, "I see you, motherfucker."



NEW YEAR'S EVE: THE MOVIE. IS HAPPENING > TOY BOY: TAYLOR LAUTNER IS STRETCH ARMSTRONG

DUE DATE

Or What Sherlock Did Next: a road trip comedy from Todd Phillips

"IT'S A FUCKED-UP COMEDY ABOUT FATHERHOOD," SAYS TODD

Phillips of *Due Date*, his new road trip comedy (not to be confused with his old road trip comedy, er, *Road Trip*), in which Robert Downey Jr.'s expectant father must travel across the States with unlikely travel companion Zach Galifianakis in order to attend his child's birth. As such, it's a perfect companion piece to Phillips's last movie, the immensely successful *The Hangover*, which was a comedy about the fear of marriage. "This is a natural progression," he admits, adding that he dived into this, rather than *The Hangover 2* (that's next), for one main reason: the chance to work with Downey Jr. "I think audiences just love him," says Phillips of the actor. "He's usually the craziest guy in his movies, even if he's Tony Stark or Sherlock. But when you're with Zach, nobody's crazier than Zach! So, by default, he's the straight man. But in my movies, even the straight men are a little fucked-up..."

> *Due Date* is out in November.

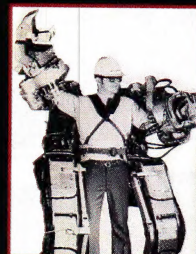
▶ **HAPPY FEET 2 BEGINS IN SYDNEY** ▶ **UNLIMITED NEWS: RUPERT MURDOCH IS KEEN FOR AN AVATAR SEQUEL**

Suited and boosted

Wear one of these, and you'll be a real iron man...

HARDIMAN

This first attempt at building a powered exoskeleton, by GE in 1965, didn't go too well. The suit made dangerously violent movements when worn, and while it could lift up to 340 kilos, it weighed twice that itself. Looked rubbish, too.



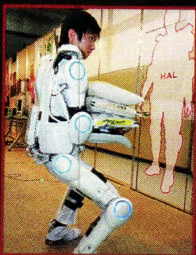
LIFESUIT

Twenty years later, US Army Ranger Monty Reed designed the LIFESUIT while recovering from a broken back. He was inspired by the description of Mobile Infantry Power Suits in Robert Heinlein's novel, *Starship Troopers*.



HAL 5

Tsukuba University in Japan is field-testing its Hybrid Assistive Limb suit. The HAL 5 is a full exoskeleton which multiplies lifting strength by five times. It will be mass-produced by Cyberdyne Inc. That's not a joke. Really.



BLEEX

Sounds like something you do after downing a Guinness, but it stands for the Berkeley Lower Extremity Exoskeleton. It's a pair of superpowered leg-braces designed specifically to lend strength to the lower body.



RAYTHEON SARCOS XOS

This 70 kilo suit is the design of choice for the US Department Of Defense, and will be used by the army for heavy lifting – although there's unsurprisingly talk of combat customisations.

DAN JOLIN

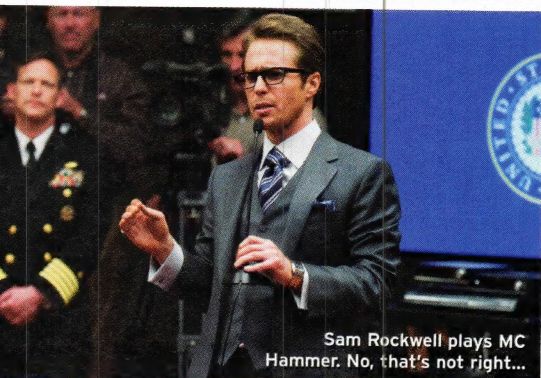


really wanted to make a movie that everyone can see and not feel sold short, the fans, families... there's just so few movies like that."

> *Iron Man 2* is out on April 29 and will be reviewed in a future issue.



Guess who didn't return the 3-D glasses to the cinema...



Sam Rockwell plays MC Hammer. No, that's not right...

blowing when you follow a hunch and you realise it's exactly what the movie wanted."

Downey smiles mischievously and fiddles with a small plastic attache case packed with vitamins and assorted health-potions which he is, apparently, rarely seen without. A nod, perhaps, to the fact that the action quotient on the second outing is rumoured to have increased exponentially. "Lazy", it seems, is just not on the cards.

"Yeah, the action's certainly got bigger. But I went and did *Sherlock Holmes*, which was a real balls-to-the-wall get-your-fists-grazed adventure," he says. "So coming back into this, I really challenged our stunt team to get our hands dirty a little more, because I was still kind of into that... I love it so much. There is no better day that I can have than one where I beat people up or get thrown around. I just love it. It's supposed to be safe, but it's a little more than acting so it's really fun."

THE BIG QUESTION, THOUGH, IS WHITHER TONY STARK? AT THE END OF *IRON MAN* HE HAD REVEALED HIS SECRET IDENTITY (THE KIND OF THUNDEROUS PLOT

beat that many a franchise would save for a rainier day) and forsworn the international arms industry. What's left to do?

"The first one was an origins story that was very plotty. You know he couldn't have ever imagined that he'd be put into captivity, but he knew that with the right resources he could get out," says Downey. "But he didn't know what was going to happen when he got out. I think this one, from the beginning, is him very much looking at his own mortality. He has no idea what's going to carry him the rest of the way. He's going to need a lot of support and help that he hasn't needed before."

Hmm. Yes. All admirably non-specific...

"Oh, I'm enough of a company man now to know when to keep my mouth shut," Downey grins when pressed for more plot intelligence. "I don't think it's any secret that Tony has father issues. And it's a lot more physical and a lot more complex than it was before. I think it's no mystery that Mickey Rourke and I go toe-to-toe. But the manner in which it happens, and the origins of our relationship, and the way that we meet, and when and where we confront each other is, I think, unique and very interesting. Mickey's a big talent, and a very eccentric guy, and rather than retro-fit the actors and actresses in this move to the pre-determined character, we've definitely done the entire reverse and retrofitted the character to the personality of the person who's going to do it. So, you know, it's been a trip."

Back on set and the A.D.s are wrangling the extras and mannequins for another bout of hollering. Favreau's young son, on set as a vacation treat, entertains the crowd with some extemporaneous dance moves. His dad looks on. "I always keep my kids in mind when I'm shooting," he muses, when asked about how he judges *Iron Man*'s uniquely accessible tone. "I

AVATAR





BLUE PLANET

EMPIRE CATCHES UP WITH JAMES CAMERON POST-AVATAR DAY, POST-BACKLASH AND WONDERS IF HE'S STILL EXPECTING HIS LATEST BLOCKBUSTER TO BE A *TITANIC* SUCCESS

WORDS JAMES DYER

AUGUST 21ST, 2009. *AVATAR* DAY. THIS WAS THE DAY FANS HAD BEEN WAITING FOR, THE MOMENT THEY'D FINALLY GET TO CATCH A LONG-AWAITED GLIMPSE OF JAMES CAMERON'S FIRST MOVIE IN 12 years, his much-vaunted "game-changer". Anticipation levels were approaching nuclear — like Christmas Day, graduation and the release of Britney's second album all rolled into one. In an unprecedented demonstration of studio confidence, Fox and Cameron would reveal 16 minutes of footage, accessible to all, for free, at selected cinemas around the world. Punters travelled from far and wide, turning out *en masse* to gorge themselves on a full quarter-hour of glorious 3-D sci-fi. Meanwhile, online, 120 seconds of sizzling sequences had been shot out into the void. The first teaser dropped onto servers across the Internet, all but imploding Apple's website when more than four million people surged to witness the big unveiling. As they watched, tantalising images flashed across their computer screens: hulking grey gunships, grizzled shock troops, exotic beasts, luminescent flora and, of course, the Na'vi — *Avatar*'s blue-skinned protagonists. Pandora's box lay open and the response from the online community was, understandably, deafening.

Though not in the way you might have thought.

Rather than the succulent cut of meat thrown to a pack of starving dogs, the teaser was a match dropped atop a mountain of nitroglycerine. Initial reactions were bewildered, then disappointed, and finally very, very angry. An outpouring of belligerent spleen-venting soon followed, the net burning with invective as bloggers rolled up their sleeves and loosed their critical fury. By the indignant reaction, you'd have thought the sum of *Avatar*'s presentation

had been a pair of blue sock-puppets cavorting in front of a cardboard backdrop, rather than the subtly realised and beautifully rendered fruit of Cameron's labours. Nevertheless, a slew of inexplicably punctuated diatribes followed and all but drowned out anything else. A few examples:

Drone: MEH

Porter: It looks fucking awful! It's a trailer for a computer game! George Lucas is about to shank my dreams all over again by using a Cameron *Avatar* to slide this crappy-looking dud into cinemas!

Chris3759: Another love story of *TITANIC* proportions. This is gonna suck.

Leroythemasochist: why are these aliens blue? they live on a green planet don't they? shouldn't they be, oh I dunno, GREEN?

Trannyformers: JAR JAR AVATAR. FUCK YEAH. 400 million dollar cartoon. LOOK LIKE SHIT. LMAO

Zzzardozz: Is this a remake of *Ferngully* or is it actually a sequel?

Dogginz: WTF? He's ripped off *Halo*! Seriously, it looks like a cutscene from fucking *Halo*.

MontyPigeon: *Halo* vs *Thundercats* in 3D

FloatingSkull: Like a *Halo* cut scene as created by a 13 year old girl with glitter and puppies and unicorns. Gay Gay Gay.

Quite. Having been told time and again to expect a quantum leap in special effects, the masses had rebelled, tripping over each other to demonstrate their contempt. But despite all the spit and bile flung in his direction, Cameron remained entirely unfazed by the abuse. In fact, he welcomed it.

"I think it's good," he says with a smile, as *Empire* cautiously uncurls itself from the protective ball it's rolled itself into. "It was a necessary step in the process: recalibrating the

AVATAR

Released: December 17

Budget: \$200 million (estimated)

Director: James Cameron

Starring: Sam Worthington, Sigourney Weaver, Zoe Saldana, Michelle Rodriguez, Giovanni Ribisi, Stephen Lang

Plot: Paralegic ex-Marine Jake Sully (Worthington) embarks on a mission to the verdant world of Pandora as part of the experimental *Avatar* program — an initiative where volunteers project their consciousness into hybrid alien bodies, or "avatars", to walk among the planet's native population. Pandora is rich in resources, though, and the indigenous Na'vi people are less than thrilled to discover the attempts to exploit their natural habitat.

mindset of the fan population from the movie that they were making in their heads to what the movie actually is. It was a step that had to happen. Every one of those people had an idea of what they thought the film should be, and finally they were faced with what it was, which wasn't what they wanted. It was what I wanted."

He laughs at this and cracks a genuine, good-natured smile. "In the grand psychology of how these things work, people have to attack, they have to get it out of their system. Actually at this point I'm more interested in getting controversy than having everybody in agreement. Controversy fuels curiosity and curiosity can only be assuaged by buying a ticket and seeing for yourself."

It's an enlightened, sensible, almost Zen-like response — not what you'd expect from a filmmaker whose reputation has him toasting DPs for breakfast and flash-frying studio bosses for lunch. But then, he's hardly a stranger to operating under enemy fire. Back in 1997, while the blogosphere was still filling its nappies, the global print media were lining up to blast >

"CONTROVERSY IS MORE INTERESTING THAN AGREEMENT. CONTROVERSY FUELS CURIOSITY."
JAMES CAMERON

AVATAR



Trouble erupts on the planet Pandora.

critical cannonballs at Cameron's head. *Titanic* had slipped behind schedule, the budget had spiralled, the suits were worried and a disgruntled crewmember had spiked the seafood chowder with angel dust. Cameron had forfeited his fee, his reputation and, it looked increasingly likely, his career, all to tell the tale of a doomed ocean liner's journey to the bottom of the deep blue sea. But even as the critics delighted in his misfortune and leaped upon the finished film with scathing reviews, Cameron battened down the hatches and just went about his work.

"You know, the film might not have been as good without all that hectoring. It caused us to hunker down. For most of the post-production we assumed we were screwed, so we just made the best damned movie that we could. We didn't try to tailor it to make the most money because everyone assumed it wasn't going to make any anyway."

Twelve years, 11 Academy Awards and \$1.8 billion dollars later, *Titanic* is, by anyone's measure, the most successful film in the history of cinema. Its erstwhile detractors have long since shuffled off into a corner, bloated on giant portions of humble pie. After Oscar night 1998, three things were certain: Cameron would never have difficulty finding a job, his household would never want for doorstops and film critics would think long and hard before doubting him again. It was the ultimate vindication, and detractors would be foolish to discount the possibility that the director will pull a similar, if somewhat bluer, rabbit out of the hat with *Avatar*.

"Well, this wasn't designed as that sort of film, which is what I told Fox when I pitched it to them," he counters. "It's a very character-driven movie and it can be taken seriously, but I don't expect it to be. Besides, the Academy has always



Na'vi nemesis Col. Quaritch (Stephen Lang) faces off against Sully.

**"I CAN'T IMAGINE ME
AGED 15 OR 16 NOT
LOVING THIS MOVIE,
WATCHING IT AND NOT
BEING SATISFIED."
JAMES CAMERON**

shunned science-fiction and fantasy — *Return Of The King* being really the only exception." He pauses thoughtfully. "You know, given the choice, I would have chosen to not have any of that, even with *Titanic*. Simply because it's so gruelling getting to that point. I would have been happy if *Titanic* had just gone out and just made a lot of money, you know what I mean? It was never made to be a critic's darling; I didn't construct it that way and I've never really thought of myself as that kind of filmmaker. I always figured Oliver Stone was that guy. I always thought he'd make films and I'd make movies."

NOVEMBER 6, 2009. AVATAR IS, BY CAMERON'S ESTIMATE, 96 PER CENT COMPLETE. THE FINAL EFFECTS SHOTS ARE TRICKLING THROUGH FROM WETA, AND WHEN WE CATCH UP WITH THE DIRECTOR

once more, he's preparing to spend the day with James Horner, scoring the film's climactic final battle. We're a month away from release and the initial backlash has now faded. Despite the teaser's extremely rough landing, the feedback from *Avatar* Day's theatrical footage screenings had been extremely encouraging, with more than 100,000 people dragging themselves out of that dent in the sofa to witness those 16 minutes in their intended 3-D. A month later, Cameron followed it up with a full, three-minute trailer for the film, one bursting with action, effects and — most importantly — exposition. It received an overwhelmingly positive and wholly different reception from those same bloggers who had previously jeered at the film and poked it with sticks. The "recalibration", as Cameron described it, was complete.

"It was kind of unprecedented for a movie to be so anticipated sight unseen of anything," he reflects, looking back on the initial wave of criticism. "What we may have done incorrectly was held back story. The teaser was light on story but long on design and visual concept. What I learned from that was that people really want some story to hang their hat on; they want to understand what the stakes are."

"With the first one I was harking back to some of the teaser trailers that I really liked back in the day. If you think about the teaser for *Close Encounters* or *Alien*, they were very abstract, they were all about a promise with no fulfilment. That's why we call it a teaser! But apparently people need to be teased with very specific things these days."

Whether as a deliberate tease or a more cynical attempt to reel in the *Titanic* crowd, the first trailer had focused on the mood, atmosphere and feelings of the film, rather than ramming a dragon gunship down your throat. It was a lesson that had been well learned for the follow-up, which arrived boasting everything the first one had lacked, and finally awakened the desired response from the *Aliens* and *Terminator* crowd.

But even if public opinion has taken a turn, Cameron isn't entirely happy relying on a trailer — even a densely packed one — to convey the real experience. For him, *Avatar*'s isn't just a narrative journey, but a visual one as well. The film begins rooted in live action, working up to the first reveal when Jake meets his avatar floating in its gestation tube. From there we see Jake wake up as the avatar in a real, human setting, and even the first forays in to Pandora's digital undergrowth are accompanied by humans to keep things grounded. By the time Cameron weans the audience into an entirely CG world, it has been done so gradually that viewers are left wondering exactly where the transition was. It's a carefully considered process, and one that's entirely lost in a three-minute sizzle reel. "What I always dreaded was the 30-second TV spot, where it's 'BAM!' and you're basically just looking at a blue guy."

Most of the naysayers quelled, all eyes are now

Jake Sully (Sam Worthington).



Talk to the ear: Selfridge (Giovanni Ribisi) and Dr Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver).

fixed on December 17, when the final film will play for audiences, putting an end to speculation once and for all. Despite all the trials, the endless hours, a decade of work and a roasting from the Internet, Cameron remains unbowed, unbent and unbroken; as confident now as the day he began shooting. Because for every sceptic who thinks *Avatar* hype is just a case of The Emperor's New Clothes, there were 10 more who said *Titanic* would fail because everyone knew the ship was going to sink. The director has learned to let it all flow over him. For Cameron it all comes down to those first viewers who take their seats on opening weekend, and whether the dream he's concocted can ignite their imagination as much as it has his.

"I have to look at it from a perspective of me as a movie fan — especially when I was 15 or 16-years-old," he explains. "I can't imagine that person not loving this movie. I just can't. I can't imagine that person, that fan, watching this and not being satisfied."

This unwavering faith in the end product weathers all criticism and gives the impression that, regardless of what he reads online or how many people doubt him, Cameron *knows* that *Avatar* is everything he wanted it to be. And his excitement, reaching fever pitch with the end now in sight, makes him seem every inch the teenage boy he's so sure will agree with him.

"There's just one last part of the adventure that hasn't happened yet, which is to sit and watch the whole movie for two-and-a-half hours. I haven't done that yet, nobody has. But in another 10 days I'll be able to sit and watch it end-to-end with the final music, in 3-D. I can't wait!"

And as for those people still whingeing that it just looks like *Halo*? "Isn't *Halo* just *Aliens*?" He laughs. "Even that has kind of a nice thematic continuity."

> Avatar is out on December 17 and will be reviewed online.